

Stefania Barca

*Enclosing Water: Nature and Political Economy in a Mediterranean Valley, 1796–1916*

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*Enclosing Water* is a sophisticated, multi-dimensional history of the liberation and industrialisation of nature during the long nineteenth century. Stefania Barca examines a ten-mile stretch of the Liri River Valley in the Italian Apennines behind Naples that became the ‘Manchester of the Two Sicilies’. But unlike its namesake, the Bourbon’s and later the national project to engineer both its environment and society failed to bring order to either. On the contrary, a waterpower version of the tragedy of the commons resulted in an escalation of flooding, litigation, violence, and class and gender inequalities. After a hundred-year regime of a weak, ‘un-improving state’ (p. 126), the still impoverished people of the valley had few opportunities other than to undertake what became a mass exodus.

Employing Campbell Scott’s concept of ‘seeing like a state’, Barca has written a brilliant case study of the ‘political ecology’ (p. 20) of industrialisation. In 1806, the abolition of feudalism liberated the water flowing in the Liri Valley from local monopolists, ending their imposition of the equivalent of an ‘energy rent’ for the use of their mills. Pursuing the Enlightenment project of improvement, the French rulers sought not only to free communal land and water but also to privatise them in order to create a new middle class of manufacturers, merchants and landowners. Their fortunes and loyalties, in turn, would be tied to the success of the Empire.

Barca’s attention to detail has produced a much deeper understanding than Scott’s of this process of turning visionary ideals into shapes on the ground. She interrogates a wide range of official documents such as topographical maps, natural resource surveys, engineering reports, court cases and legislative hearings. Her analysis of these sources shows how they served as the instruments of reductionism that quantified the landscape into standardised commodities. By the 1830s, the river would become crowded with the machines of would-be mill operators, each claiming access to a share of this now free, public resource as a private right of citizenship.

Yet, in this colonial development on the periphery of the Empire, an interrelated combination of local landscape and culture trumped the political economy of global capitalism. From ancient times, the valley had been transformed into a bi-focal agro-geography of rich upland orchards and poor lowland grain crops. Soil erosion from deforestation of the mountains had turned areas of the plains below into malaria-breeding marshes. To escape, the people had resettled on the healthier hillsides. But ‘seeing like statisticians’ (p. 41), the state’s bureaucrats pictured this apparently timeless pastoral tableau as an unproductive wasteland

## BOOK REVIEWS

caused by the 'disorder of water'. Their efforts to re-envision it into an engine of private enterprise and civic progress were frustrated, however, by the valley's entrenched socio-ecological relationships. The reformers found little property to redistribute and most of it ended up in hands of the biggest landowners, who were also the only ones financially capable of undertaking large-scale irrigation projects to reclaim the marshes.

By mid-century, moreover, the central government discovered that a capitalist rule of law in the Liri Valley was engendering equally perverse, unintended consequences as the liberation of its waterpower. Under the Napoleonic Civil Code, the public trust doctrine made the state the owner of flowing water and gave the citizens an equal, common right to use it. Despite a cult of scientism, hydraulic experts had limited tools of measurement, which led to a gross over-appropriation of the river's energy potential. Moreover, the owners of older mills and their upstart rivals used the new law's safeguards of property rights against each other to build a logjam of private suits in the courts. Town government opposition to central authority added to this legal blockade, which stymied every attempt of officials to reach a compromise on a comprehensive plan for the river.

With neither fiscal nor administrative power, a weak state fostered not a productive order of the water but an anarchistic scramble among mill operators to capture as much of its flowing energy as was needed to keep their machines turning a profit. As they constructed larger and higher obstructions in the river, downstream waterwheels literally stopped spinning while upstream areas suffered flooding, including the inundation of whole towns. These increasingly frequent environmental disasters added to the misery of their swelling populations of desperately poor women and children factory workers. Combined with simmering unrest among the sharecroppers, the valley became a revolutionary tinderbox of populism during the nation-building period known as the *Risorgimento*. Finding itself again a peripheral colony, southern Italy came under the regime of a new, albeit still 'un-improving state' that failed to reverse the region's industrial stagnation and demographic strangulation.

Barca makes valuable use of international comparisons to illuminate the ways in which local political ecologies interact with global political economies. In what Theodore Steinberg characterised as the 'incorporation of nature', Boston's merchants were able to monopolise the industrialisation of the entire Connecticut River by coming together to form an overwhelming power out of private capital. In contrast, the Liri Valley was ridden with family feuds and class conflicts that quickly turned the commons of the river into a new battlefield of this endless social warfare. She demonstrates that '[its] entrepreneurs' perceptions of the water property contradicted the very nature of the river' (p. 114).

In an analogous example of the strong power of an improving state, she highlights the comprehensive planning exercised by Prussia over wetlands reclamation projects to better order its river ecosystems. Left empty-handed in southern Italy, local officials of the central government could not use these kinds of

public works as state-building instruments of a liberal, capitalist regime. Without them, the 'permanence of quasi-feudal relationships' (p. 68) in the Liri Valley shaped its new riverscape of waterpower into a self-image of its authoritarian hierarchy of class and gender inequalities. Like the chronic violence raging in society, the modern state, Barca concludes, created an environment of disaster, a 'disorder of industry' (p. 133) in the wake of its failed vision of progress.

A comparative context also helps bring into sharper relief the shifting meanings and values of property ownership during the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. As Steinberg underscores in the case of Boston, American political culture was favourable to making instrumental uses of private (and public) law to promote economic development, even at a cost of the 'creative destruction' of vested rights. The Liri Valley represents a case study of an incomplete, stalled transition in this pivotal process of redefining landed property from traditional use values to modern exchange values. At times, Barca conflates the two meanings into a general condemnation of state capitalism. Nonetheless, her penetrating, multi-layered unpacking of this tragic story makes significant contributions to environmental, social and intellectual history. *Enclosing Water* is essential reading for understanding the dialectical consequences of changing socio-ecological relationships. It offers an original, thought-provoking way of seeing how society creates landscapes out of visionary ideal of itself.

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*Restoration and History: The Search for a Usable Environmental Past*  
 New York: Routledge, 2010  
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Two thousand years ago, the Roman advance into the Scottish highlands ended at the Great Wood of Caledon, a collection of old-growth forests that slowed the Roman army and protected the Scottish people. Since then, centuries of human habitation, intensive agriculture, and mining have decimated the once abundant stands of Scots Pine. But the loss of this national treasure was not permanent. In the 1980s, Scottish environmentalists won public support for measures to restore the Great Wood. Yet the story these activists told was largely myth: historians, archaeologists and paleoecologists have all refuted any notion of the Great Wood of Caledon. Yet the myth persists in public debate, prompting Mairi Stewart to ask, 'does the past matter in Scottish woodland restoration?'

*Restoration and History: The Search for a Usable Environmental Past* situates Stewart's argument among a broader questioning of restoration projects, providing a powerful argument for the importance of history in restoration ecology, and exhorting further cross-fertilisation between history and the sciences. An